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Composer and saxophonist John Zorn jumps genres with ease and makes them his own. As experimental music's biggest star, he's a natural to headline Victoriaville's 20th Festival International de Musique Actuelle

Sonic wizard mixes a potent brew

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Stepping into John Zorn's panoramic musical world – twisted funhouse-mirrors, chambers of horror and meditation rooms – is like entering a Toys R Us run by the Addams Family. How to start characterizing his vast, varied repertoire? You could invoke Tzadik, the name of his prolific record label, a Hebrew word meaning a charismatic leader who performs righteous deeds. Then again, Zorn means "anger" in German.

To paraphrase a song, don't fence him in. The 49-year-old composer and alto saxophonist loves encouraging musical colleagues to new heights, yet he's also known as a control freak. He's open but efficient. He disdains interviews, but his charmingly self-conscious liner notes are insightful. He's oft-shunned by jazzbos who claim he "can't play" and classical wigs who feel he's "superficial."

As experimental music's biggest star over the last two decades – crossing genres with ease, personalizing them – Zorn is a natural to headline the 20th-anniversary edition of the Festival International de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville. The event has gone a long way in putting Zorn's kind of music on the map.

He's always been a voracious cultural scavenger with big ears and a bee in his bonnet, a man-child with a weakness for mavericks. At age 9 he became fascinated by Bach organ music after seeing Lon Chaney in the original Phantom of the Opera. Zorn was playing bass in a surf band and immersed in the Doors when he first got deeply into Stravinsky, Berg, Varese and other heavy-hitters of 20th-century music. Yet it was the kinetic cut-up style of vintage Warner Bros. cartoon music that had the most profound influence on the so-called "bad boy of new music."

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> John Zorn

And his popular Sephardic-tinged quartet Masada – named after the mountaintop fortress in Israel where 1,000 Jews committed suicide rather than be captured by the Romans in AD 1 – started as a session band creating a noir-ish soundtrack for an underground crime caper. Go figure! (Nah.)

Zorn's recorded oeuvre sprawls over at least 92 albums in 25 years, from the thorny to the dreamy. There are cut-and-paste tributes to major influences (pulp-meister Mickey Spillane, French nouvelle vague icon Jean-Luc Godard, soundtrack wizard Ennio Morricone), knotty game-pieces, free jazz, easy-listening, pan-ethnic pop, idiosyncratic chamber and classical orchestral music (the just-released Chimeras, loosely inspired by Schoenberg's masterwork Pierrot Lunaire), not to mention avant-thrash-punk.

A by-product of this smorgasbord, says the quixotic composer, is to "break all these hierarchies: the idea that classical music is better than jazz, that jazz is better than rock ... Some artists are hacks and some are masters, and I'd rather listen to a master of Muzak than a classical hack."

A jazz enthusiast who was loath to copy the Afro-American blues tradition, Zorn formed Masada 18 years ago and has since given it a repertoire of 208 songs composed in one of the two "Jewish scales," with no tune taking up more than five lines of music paper.

The formula has improbably made Masada into arguably the jazz world's most fiery popular combo, its progress squarely in the tradition of great improvising groups; his interplay with trumpeter Dave Douglas recalls the cosmic alchemy of Lester Young and Buck Clayton in the late 1930s, or Ornette Coleman and Don Cherry from 1959-61.

Zorn's Masada tunes are also played by his sublimely subtle chamber groups, collectively known as Bar Kokhba. This is jaunty, hummable, wandering music, imbued with melancholy but percolating with quiet adventure and nifty touches (such as surf guitar and sparse Brazilian per cussion).

Electric Masada, which began around the same time as the acoustic combo, puts the songbook through sonic terrain inspired in part by Miles Davis's 1969 fusion breakthrough Bitches Brew (doubling keyboards and percussions). From recent reports, this is an all-star band – including guitarist Marc Ribot, organist John Medeski, percussionist Cyro Baptista, and bassist Trevor Dunn from Mr. Bungle – that plays with the enthusiasm of innocents.

His most-performed composition, Cobra, is a "game piece" inspired by the war-strategy board games of Avalon-Hill, in which Zorn signals semaphore-like instructions and card cues for the 13 musicians to freely interpret (including leading Quebec improvisers René Lussier and Diane Labrosse).

Electric Masada and Cobra are wise and challenging choices to represent Zorn at Victo.

Much of composing, he says, entails listening. "No generation of composers has been exposed to as much different music as we have," thanks to recording technologies. Naturally the composer should be "voracious," he says.

"Twenty or thirty years ago, you had to bend over backward to find a record from Bali. Today, media's gone nuts. We're just trying to incorporate all these different elements that are available to us."

Zorn takes the global cornucopia personally. One estimate put his collection at about 26,000 records and 7,000 CDs, another 2,000 movies on tape, laser and DVD, and 2,000 books on arts, history and philosophy. Sometimes he likes to put on a movie with "atmosphere" when he composes. He's lived in the same East Village apartment in New York City for 25 years. He had the kitchen removed to make way for his stuff; he eats out or orders in. He doesn't watch TV or read the papers. He works.

He works with a coterie of top musicians – in demand by the discriminating likes of Tom Waits, Elvis Costello, and Marianne Faithful – who enjoy being "actively involved in creating something, not just slavishly following the directions of an autonomous musical mind." He holds "intensely private communications" with musicians, telling guitar wizard Bill Frisell to "sound like a train crash," or Bobby Previte "to hit his drums like a 16-year-old on acid," or prepping Anthony Coleman for a cocktail-piano sequence: "You're not Duke Ellington, you're Joe Jigs!"

The noted Dutch musicologist Gert-Jan Blom, producer of Zorn's chamber double-album Cartoon/S&M, praises his repertoire "that allows a freedom of interpretation and expression, combined with humour and an appeal to craftsmanship, that is unparalleled in contemporary music and appreciated by musicians all over the world." As Zorn recently wrote: "Working with me has become a kind of downtown right of passage because I'm a f--ing maniacal slave driver. A man possessed. I will work musicians harder than they have ever worked before, intensely and relentlessly, demanding complete concentration and unconditional loyalty. But when I get it, I give all the loyalty, support, love and appreciation I have in return."

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Zorn is synonymous with the teeming downtown New York scene of the early 1980s whose genre-busting continues to be a distinguishing feature on the new-music landscape. The mild-mannered Frisell, who became an alt-jazz guitar hero during this time, says Zorn was "looking at music from a completely different angle. I'd never heard anything like it," – using the studio as a musical instrument – "to try 'anything and everything,' everything captured by the rolling tape."

The composer who once distilled Morricone's score for The Good, the Bad and the Ugly into a one-minute rendering helped spawn a mad-mad-mad sampling world; like anything else, appropriation can become superhuous and overdone. Zorn is nothing if not a scholar with catholic tastes. He works meticulously at shaping form to fit a boundless imagination.

That's where he leans on the cartoon music modus operandi of the legendary 1940s Warner Bros. composer Carl Stalling, who by "following the visual logic of screen action rather than the traditional rules of musical form (development, theme and variations, etc.)" created a "radical compositional arc unprecedented in the history of music." The basic musical elements are "broken into shards: a constantly changing kaleidoscope of styles, forms, melodies, quotations and, of course, the 'Mickey Mousing' (sonic descriptions of visual events)." Thus Zorn, the inveterate collector, writes on index cards.

He welcomes ongoing ritualistic performances of Cobra around the world, but warns: accept no substitute. "To do this music properly is to do it with a community of like-minded musicians and an understanding of tactics, personal dynamics, instrumentation, aesthetics and group chemistry. It's about co-operation, interaction, checks and balances, tension and release and many more ineffable things, both musical and social." That's a bulls-eye description of Zorn's entire world.

John Zorn leads Cobra and Electric Masada, next Friday and Saturday respectively, at the Festival international de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville. Tickets are $32 (Friday) and $35 (Saturday), from Admission, (514) 790-1245, and Productions Plateforme, (819) 752-7912.

FROM GAZETTE FILES

John Zorn's recorded oeuvre sprawls over at least 92 albums in 25 years, from the thorny to the dreamy.

Zorn's repertoire ranges from bittersweet to spooky

The following is a selection from more than 90 Zorn titles released, unless otherwise indicated, on his indie label Tzadik:

Bar Kokhba (1996) and **The Circle Maker (1998)** (both ★★★★): The most accessible Zorn. Double-discs of compelling chamber music groupings perform Masada's bittersweet reveries with beguiling simplicity and tasty chops. A charming 10th-anniversary coda is the stripped-down solo **Masada Guitars (2003)** (★★★½).

The Masada jazz quartet has recorded 21 discs of music since 1994. The best place to start is the double-CD dose **Live at Tonic 2001** (★★★★½), two complete sets at his favoured downtown digs. Buoyant communication, honed and boundlessly creative, marks Masada's sixth live set.

Cobra Vol. 2 (2002) (★★★½): A "game-piece" [illegible] enhanced live, Cobra's fiendish improvisational complexity is a key to Zorn's punctilious modus operandi.

COURTESY OF TZADIK

The Bribe: woozy crime scenes.

News For Lulu (1987, Hatfut) (★★★★½): A wildly original tribute to under-appreciated Blue Note jazz-diary with mad-professor guitarist Bill Frisell, amazingly elastic trumbonist George Lewis, and Zorn's sax squalls. A summit of telepathic improvised jazz.

Godard/Spillane (1988-1999) (★★★½): Zorn's classic "aural cinema" pulp-fiction tribute in a glittery re-mastering, paired with the armchair po-mo internationalism of Godard. A more fully realized work in this cloistered noir vein, recorded months later, is the 76-minute **The Bribe (1998)** (★★★★), 26 scenes out of woozy Weegee-crime photos.

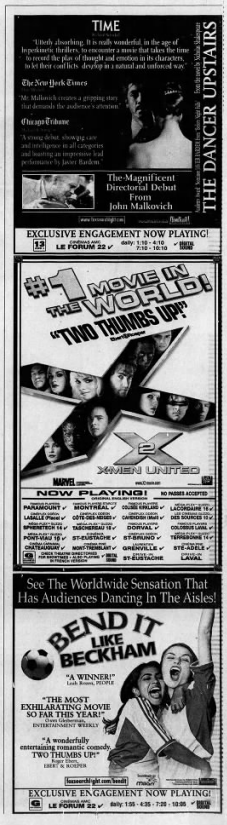
Naked City (1989, Nonesuch) (★★★★): Atmospheric pop kitsch (Morricone, Mancini, Chinatown, Bond) and cartoon-noir originals. Lickety-split guitar by Frisell and extroverted drumming by Joey Baron set a stylistic template that quickly grew wilder on later releases.

The Big Gundown, 15th Anniversary Edition (1999) (★★★★): Ending with six newly recorded updates, this phantasmagoric tribute to Morricone movie music is a good introduction to Zorn's imagination.

Cartoon/S&M (2000) (★★★½): The title sums up two main influences in this spectacular sampling of major chamber works ("classical" but often inspired by perverse takes on pop) performed by leading European ensembles. Skittering, slithering, sprawling: Intense, visual, conjure music.

Film Works Vol. 13: Invitation To A Suicide: (2002) (★★★): Extremely hypnotic music – postmod Tubular Bells via Nino Rota and David Lynch? – spun with economically edgy guitar by Marc Ribot, spooky vibes by Kenny Wollesen, lyrical accordionist Rob Burger, and Erik Friedlander's plangent cello.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ



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